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GUATEMALA

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Camps Connect Rural and Urban Youth



Photo: Luis Córdova, Partners of Americas

A young man from a Ladino area of Guatemala City bids his Mayan Kiché friend farewell.

One participant said, “We came here very unsure we would like being in the woods. We didn’t like being with the ‘indigenous’.... Now we don’t want to leave. We learned so much and are friends. We are crying and hugging today before going home.”

From 1997 to 2004, USAID's Youth Leadership and Employability Skills Program helped disenfranchised young Guatemalans abandon conflict and discrimination in favor of more productive ways of living and working.

The program brought together urban and rural youth at 10- to 15-day camps — and was met with skepticism by many participants. But mixing young people from different backgrounds in an intercultural camp setting turned out to be a resounding success and proved to be a powerful and immediate way to generate the understanding, tolerance and respect that are the building blocks of peace.

Integrating youth from gang-infested urban neighborhoods with rural youth from four Mayan sociolinguistic groups created a clash of cultures and stereotypes. But it also generated an impressive kaleidoscope of testimonials, tears, apologies, hugs, teamwork — and even an exchange of clothes for a

role-playing game. In the end, not one youth left that camp without making a new friend from a different background.

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